HAMSA HERBS

Newsletter Winter 2025/26 (#1)

Greetings from our Farm!



Winter is already knocking on our door. With the harvest of the rosehips (*Rosa canina*) and the digging up of liquorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) and ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*) roots, our fourth growing season has come to an end. Now, it's time to take stock. We have several exciting updates to share, not least the launch of this newsletter! We will be sharing less on social media, as we do not want to support the direction those platforms are taking, and it's become nearly impossible to reach and inform people outside those spaces. This newsletter is our way to connect with you. We'll still post some photos and some news, but if you'd like to receive more in-depth updates about our farm, this newsletter, which I'll write only a few times a year, is for you. I am still developing the layout of this letter, and honestly, it is the first newsletter I have ever written, so I will be experimenting for a while. For now, it will include news about our farm, information about a particular herb we are growing, a recipe, and updates on any events we are organising. Perhaps it is also useful to point out that this newsletter is written by me, Laura, a human and also an herbal expert :-)

Let's begin with a reality check on the past two growing seasons. The summer of 2024 was a particularly tough one for our farm. We endured over three months of relentless drought and heatwaves, and wildfires in the surrounding area reduced hectares of crops and bushes to smouldering coal. The faintest smell of smoke would immediately capture our attention, and we were in a constant mode of high alert.

Knowing that the effects of drought become evident in the following growing season, we began germinating our first herbs as early as January to get a head start and make use of the spring rains to establish new crops. We refreshed our mint fields and replanted other herbs. In the gardens, we were often amazed to see herbs like elecampane (*Inula helenium*), which we had presumed dead, show their first reddish-tinged leaves. Artemisia species and the happiness tree (*Albizia julibrissin*) also germinated abundantly, more than ever before. It is truly awe-inspiring how life finds ways to survive hardship and thrive again. This same force

moves within us, too, so we picked ourselves up and started the new herbal season with renewed energy.

What happened next was not what we wished for, as one weather extreme followed another. The spring started with a snowstorm, and we had frost on the very last day of April. May arrived slowly and seemed reluctant to bring the typical spring weather that provides crops with the light, warmth, and water they need to grow. When June arrived, it was as if a switch had been flipped. Summer began abruptly, and from one day to the next, temperatures soared. This sudden change caused the leaves on the trees to burn in the sun, while the young herbs, newly settled in the soil, dropped their leaves as if to shield the few roots they had managed to grow from drying out. Yet again, the season turned hot and dry, with exactly 5 days of light rain over nearly 4 months. It has now emerged that 2025 was the driest year in Bulgaria in nearly 100 years.



Two drought seasons, that's quite tough for a small farm like ours because the work is more intense, costs are higher, yields are lower, and by August, we were really exhausted. Yet, the beauty of this hardship is the sense of togetherness with the plants, animals, and insects on the farm. We are all in it together and must make the best of it.

We ensured the animals had water to drink, and it's amazing how they can sense a water source from far away. We created little oases for them, and they came: hares, squirrels, tortoises, pheasants, and many other visitors who left clues of their presence but never showed themselves. Eventually, three wild sows arrived, bringing 13 piglets to teach them the art of snout cultivation.

They roamed our land, searching for edible things like worms, roots, and old nuts, turning over many areas in the process. What surprised me most was that the sows cultivated the exact areas we had planned for herbal plots in the spring. I felt deeply grateful for their help, and, incredibly, they didn't disturb a single crop or damage any herbs. This is cooperation we can truly appreciate.

Despite the less-than-ideal climate, we've had a wonderful harvest this year, with the hot temperatures especially benefiting certain herbs. St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), for example, soaked up the intense sun and developed an even richer, resinous aroma.

You can now explore our teas, herbal salts, and tinctures on our brand-new website, which we launched just a few weeks ago! We also have a new tea blend featuring mountain tea (*Sideritis scardica*). You can read a little more about this fascinating herb below.



Now that winter has arrived, we're looking forward to a short break, even as preparations for the upcoming growing season are already underway. In the spring, we'll have some exciting news to share with all of you, but for now, we're keeping it under wraps.

Mountain Tea, Say What?!

Often, when we take foreign visitors around our fields and show them our plot of mountain tea (*Sideritis scardica*), they gasp at the sudden realisation that they had always thought mountain tea was a type of herbal blend. But actually, mountain tea, also known as ironwort, is a single herb that goes by many common names depending on where it is grown, so that you might know it as Pirin tea, Mursalski tea, Alibotushki tea, Greek mountain tea, Olympus tea, etc.



Mountain tea is a flowering perennial plant belonging to the Lamiaceae, the mint family, and usually grows in rocky, alkaline areas at high altitudes. *Sideritis* is quite a large genus of roughly 150 species found across the Mediterranean, North Africa, and Western Asia, and many play an important role in local herbal traditions.

Notable species include *Sideritis scardica*, which we grow on our farm, and also *S. syriaca*, *S. clandestina*, and *S. raeseri*. All of the mentioned species are marketed as "mountain tea" or "ironwort" and, rich in antioxidants, flavonoids, essential oils, and tannins, are commonly used for gastrointestinal issues or to alleviate symptoms of respiratory infections.
Several species are endemic to the Balkan Peninsula, meaning that they are found only there in the wild. For this reason, many are endangered and protected, so be sure not to buy this herb if it has been wild-harvested or if its origin is unclear.

This silvery-green herb, adorned with pale yellow flowers, is highly aromatic and distinguished by its earthy, fresh, lemony scent. Mountain tea usually grows between 8 and 50 centimetres tall and is well-adapted to dry environments (xerophytic). This is why their stems and leaves are typically covered in fine, woolly hairs, a feature that helps protect the plant from harsh, arid conditions.

The genus name *Sideritis* comes from the Greek *sideros* meaning “iron.” The name is mentioned by the Greek physician Dioscorides in his comprehensive work *De Materia Medica* written in the first century A.D. However, it is unclear whether it refers to the same plants we call mountain tea today, as the plant descriptions do not fully align, and it is believed that the name served as a generic term for various herbs used to treat battle wounds caused by iron weapons. Still, the topical use of the herb is not far-fetched at all, as it is rich in anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties.

In Bulgarian culture, mountain tea holds a special place, and it is traditionally considered a tea of longevity. Because it contains iron, the herb is also believed to have anti-anaemic effects.

In the Rhodope Mountains, where the herb is commercially cultivated on a larger scale, there are many legends, for example, that mountain tea sprouted where Orpheus’s tears fell as he searched for Eurydice in the underworld. Although the origin of this story is unclear, it adds to the plant’s mystique. In recent years, the herb has inspired many creative uses, from beer, lemonade, and kombucha to a wide range of cosmetics. In 2025, mountain tea (*Sideritis syriaca*) grown in Strandzha even received Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status within the European Union.



Mountain tea is often prepared as a decoction, simmered in boiling water for 5 to 10 minutes, but you can also prepare it by simply pouring freshly boiled water over the herb and letting it steep for 10 to 15 minutes.

For me, the whole herb conveys a sense of strength balanced by a light, or airy quality in its earthy scent. This is what I tried to capture in our new tea Mountain Magic**,** a soothing herbal infusion that blends the delicate freshness of lemon balm and lemon verbena with the grounding, citrusy aftertaste of mountain tea. The result is a revitalising, yet calming, drink that supports cognitive function and metabolic health. Of course, there is much more to share about this lovely herb, but that will be a story for another day, perhaps as we walk through our gardens.



What's Cooking?

Parsley Spread

This recipe is one of our favourite bread toppings. We eat it throughout the year as long as there is parsley available in the garden, but it is especially tasty in the colder months, when there aren't many fresh edibles in the garden. Parsley is rich in antioxidant flavonoids, carotenoids, iron, zinc and plenty of vitamins C, A and K. So, this recipe is not only tasty and healthy, but also a great support during a time when the body needs that little extra care.

Of course, this recipe is very adaptable: you can try adding other herbs like chickweed or rocket, or swap the sunflower seeds for walnuts. I've provided quantities in the ingredients list for guidance, but honestly, I don't usually measure and just freestyle it with a little more or less of the ingredients. You will need a stick blender or a food processor to make a smooth paste.

Ingredients:

- 150 g fresh parsley
- 100 g of sunflower seeds
- Juice of ½ - 1 lemon
- 1 or more cloves of garlic
- 100 mL extra virgin olive oil
- Herb salt "lemon basil and lemon thyme"

Wash the parsley and gently dry it. Coarsely cut the stalks before placing them in the blender to prevent anything from getting stuck. Add the olive oil, lemon juice, sunflower seeds, garlic and herb salt to taste, and blend into a paste. Taste it and adjust by adding more lemon juice, salt or garlic. If the consistency is too thick, add a little water; if it is too thin, add more sunflower seeds. The parsley spread can be kept in the fridge in a closed container for 4 - 5 days.

That's All for Now!

I hope you enjoyed it 😊

If you like to learn more about us and our products, visit our Website.